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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: PRESIDENT SALEH'S VISIT TO
WASHINGTON

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Expectations were high for President Saleh's Washington trip and the general consensus in the press has been that the visit was largely successful. It appears, however, that the outcomes of the visit have not yet fully been conveyed to the media. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) PRE-VISIT MEDIA: Expectations were high for Saleh's visit before it began. All major outlets covered Saleh's departure and speculated about the range of bilateral issues to be discussed: primarily, cooperation on the war on terror and U.S. developmental aid to Yemen. Several media sources described a planned protest by Yemeni opposition figures in the United States, members of the Washington-based Southern Democratic Alliance. In an interview with Alsahwa.net (news website of opposition Islah Party), Mohammad Al-Mutawakel, Assistant Secretary General of the opposition Popular Forces Union, anticipated that the USG would leverage this protest to pressure Saleh to meet U.S. demands.

13. (U) OVERALL CONCLUSIONS: The media assessment of the visit as a whole has been mixed but largely positive. Al-Thawra (primary government organ) described the visit as a success and reported the USG had expressed its support for Yemen's democracy, development, and efforts to combat terrorism. Al-Thawra flagged that, as a sign of the close relationship between Yemen and the U.S., President Bush gave Saleh a pen. 26Sep.net (news website of Armed Forces-funded daily) quoted President Saleh saying his visit was "successful and fruitful." Saleh said he discussed with President Bush American support for Yemen's economic development and U.S.-Yemeni cooperation in the war on terror. He added that Yemen's efforts in the war on terror were appreciated by the USG and that Yemen and the U.S. share many common views on the Horn of Africa, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Al-Rai Al-Hur (nominally independent, pro-government weekly) reported that the Islah Party was disappointed by the visit, as there were no "positive outcomes" in the cases of either Sheikh Al-Mo'ayyad or Sheikh Zindani.

14. (U) ASYLUM REQUEST: Shortly after the conclusion of the Washington leg of the trip, local press reported on the intent of one member of the official visitors to seek political asylum in the U.S. On November 14, Alsahwa.net (Islah-affiliated news website) reported that Hamza Saleh Moqbel had declared his intention to join the Yemeni opposition in the United States. Moqbel is a former YSP member and advisor to the Governor of Al-Dali. His son-in-law is the Chairman of the Al-Dali Chamber of Commerce. Interviewed by phone, Moqbel reportedly said that his decision was made in view of Yemen's worsening conditions, rampant corruption, absence of rule of law, and harassment of domestic opposition. The news site reported further that an official statement denied Moqbel had accompanied Saleh to Washington, but that Moqbel invited public investigation of Post's list of accompanying travelers to refute the official statement. Al-Ayyam (independent Aden-based daily) confirmed Moqbel's request for asylum on the same day. On November 16, Alsahwa.net reported that Al-Dali police arrested Moqbel's son-in-law, Saleh Ali, for "illegally nominating" his father-in-law to accompany President Saleh during the U.S. visit. Al-Dali police were also reportedly questioning civil authorities in Al-Dali for issuing Moqbel identification papers.

15. (U) AL-JAZEERAH PROGRAM: On November 14, satellite channel Al-Jazeera broadcast a program on Yemeni-US relations in view of Saleh's visit to Washington. The program featured Foreign Minister Al-Qirbi, former Ambassador Edmund Hull, Faris Al-Sanabani (Deputy Press Secretary to Saleh and Publisher of the English-language Yemen Observer), Mohammad Al-Mutawakel (Assistant Secretary General of the opposition Popular Forces Union), U.S. journalist Jane Novak (a frequent commentator on Yemeni affairs), and most surprisingly, Hamza Saleh Moqbel, the member of Saleh's party who had declared his intention to seek asylum in the United States.

16. (U) Asked about his decision to seek asylum, Moqbel said that he was "fed up" with being treated as a second-class

citizen "because he is a southerner." Hull remarked that the ROYG and USG had coordinated the attack that killed Abu Ali Al-Harithi near Marib in 2002. He further mentioned that US-Yemeni cooperation is focused on development and security and encouraged further reforms in Yemen. Novak charged that Yemen's theological dialogue with Islamists is a public relations ploy and alleged that some prisoners have been given positions with the security forces after their release from prison. She criticized President Saleh's control of all authority, including the military, the judiciary, Parliament, and the official media, and denounced the state of corruption in Yemen, including the smuggling of oil and arms "with the assistance of Yemeni officials." She also highlighted the continuing harassment of journalists. Sanabani responded aggressively, accusing Novak of defaming Yemen's image abroad and calling her "an unemployed mercenary." FM Al-Qirbi invited Novak to visit Yemen and to see its democracy for herself. He added that President Bush did not discuss with Saleh the latter's decision to step down for the upcoming elections and added that Saleh has not retracted that decision. Al-Mutawakel attributed terrorist acts in Yemen to the absence of democracy, justice, and political reforms. He also voiced his skepticism about American support for emerging democracies, arguing that the U.S. "seeks only its own interests."

17. (U) RESULTS AND FOLLOW-UP: In his interview with 26Sep.net, Saleh claimed to have carried a message from Syria to the USG, though he did not describe the contents of the message, and expressed his hopes that differences between Syria and the U.S. will be amicably resolved. On November 19, however, Al-Wahdawi.net (news website of the Nasserite Party weekly) reported that a senior US official disputed Saleh's assertion, saying that Saleh had not conveyed a Syrian message to President Bush. On a separate issue, NewsYemen.net (independent news website) reported on November 17 that several jihadists have been re-arrested following a request made directly by President Bush to Saleh. The report cited Ahmad Haidarah Abu Bakr (alias Abu Al-Asha'th) as its source. (Note: Al-Asha'th is currently in police custody.) On November 16, Raynews.net (website of liberal opposition Rabita party) quoted a senior State Department official as saying that the USG is disappointed by Yemen's lack of exertion against official corruption and that the Secretary prodded Saleh in their meeting to increase the pace of reform.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: No Yemeni media outlets have yet published any reports regarding Yemen's status in the Millennium Challenge Account, a USG decision that if public, would be likely to generate considerable comment and criticism. While the very fact itself of Saleh's visit is justifiably viewed as a positive step, full public disclosure of the sometimes difficult decisions and meetings during the trip may affect public perceptions of its success as they emerge. End comment.
Krajeski